

"A stirring incantation of grief, wonder, and anger that helps us experience an event we hardly have words for."

JENNIFER GROTZ, AUTHOR OF *Cusp*



STATE STREET

A POEM BY

KATIE BOWLER





Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024

Early acclaim for Katie Bowler's **STATE STREET**

"State Street is a remarkable act of salvage. Katie Bowler's driven, encompassing narrative careens with dark humor, anger, grief, and grit through the surreal Katrina landscape. She's both in its midst — a human eye of the storm — and at 'a great distance,' seeing with compassion and shrewd clarity. The reader senses Bowler's faith in her course throughout — that out of the chaos and detritus and loss, bolstered by the conjured presences of friends and family, she can make meaning. Art is what's rescued; art becomes the rescuer. Bowler's 'small survival' is an impressive achievement."

— DEBRA ALLBERY

"A house with a tricycle perched on its roof. A man whose life's work lies stuffed into garbage bags. '[I]n the middle of this little hell,' Katie Bowler tells us, 'I find a photo of a banjo.' These are the rare, unbroken things suddenly turned to relics, haunting proof that New Orleans remains a living city. *State Street* is a poem of beautiful rage and sorrow; it is also in its very making a poem of defiant hope."

— MAURICE MANNING

STATE STREET

A POEM

STATE STREET

A POEM BY

KATIE BOWLER



"Hit bull, win steak."

BULL CITY PRESS DURHAM, NC

Copyright © 2009 by Katie Bowler

All rights reserved.

For general information or permission
to reproduce selections from this book —

Write to:

BULL CITY PRESS
1217 Odyssey Drive
Durham, NC 27713

Visit our Web site:

www.bullcitypress.com

Author Photo — Donn Young

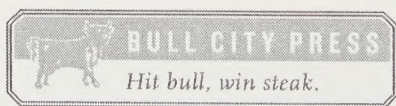
Cover Image — “Weeki Wachee Springs, Florida 1947”
by Toni Frissell

Book Design — Philip McFee

Managing Editor — Marielle Prince

ISBN: 978-1-4243-1798-1

Printed in the United States of America



For my mother

STATE STREET

This is the same street I drive every day.
Only, instead of driving it once, I drive it fifteen times.
That's a lot, fifteen,
even if you like the way a street looks.

I don't even make it around the block.
At the end of the street, the street starts over.
This part is just the dream,
but just this very small part.

At the corner, where an old guy
used to own my sunsets,
he's standing out there
telling pigeons how to fly.
He's gone now. Since the storm.
Even his pigeons haven't come home.

I know everything changes, Dad,
except always you keep saying that.
Watch this: I'm getting out the car,
I'm walking up the steps.
Yeah, Dad, he's really gone.
My pigeon man is gone.

This is just a little story
about a silence
that we should all agree
my pigeon man knew.

I drive that street fifteen times
and even in the dream

I don't need to count the broken windows
on this street anymore.
I know that number
like I know where the pavement sags.
Fifteen times down this road
and the only thing that's different
is that I'm still playing the same song,
only this time, Dad, I feel like dancing.

It's too early to tell this story. Do you know the sun hasn't even risen?
It's so quiet here in Asheville that the silence startled me awake.

This has been such a great distance.
But somewhere in that distance
there's always evening
and it will always be *that* evening.

Please come with me, Donn says.
And I say, Donn, you'll have nineteen cars and a TV crew.
What do you possibly need me for?
But Donn just says, Katie, please come.
So I say, I'll think about it, I say, Maybe, I say, I'll call you back.
My father says, Are you crazy?
Call him back, put on your shoes, get out the door—

Some things, my father says, never even send their invitations.

The morning isn't made of fog but dirt and ash,
and a checkpoint and the Guard and even some guns and tanks.

My mother's putting on her shoes.

My mother's driving.
Am I supposed to be writing?
Donn says that, Donn says that all the time.
He says, Katie, Katie, are you writing? Write this down!
And I say, Donn, I'm always writing,
and he says, Katie, Katie—are you done *yet*?

But Donn has a hug that's nothing like hugs I used to get.
And I hear myself say, Donn, you're the first person I've seen.

Only, of course I've seen other people,
but still I mean this
(whatever it means).
And Donn understands
because Donn says,
Katie, you're the first person
I've seen too.

But, man, Donn, NBC is outside
and I'm so glad I'm right here today, Donn,
because this means something,
even if we don't know what yet.
You think we ever will, Donn?
I'm not talking about where we're going or what we're doing,
just this glorious fact that we're still breathing, Donn, we're breathing.
Okay, okay. I know we don't have time for this—
there's stuff to do.

Yes, Donn, I have the recorder.
Yes, Donn, I have the extra batteries.
No, Donn, didn't think to bring that.

Okay, okay, I'm getting in your car now, Donn.
Let's lead the way.

Why does Donn talk
when buildings slashed in half
by flood lines
flash behind him in the windows?

Maybe one day, I will remember what he said.
But today, that recorder still sits in my window
saying nothing.

Why would anybody want a story like that?

Donn says to NBC, NBC this is Katie, she'll tell this story too.
I say, Hi NBC, hi Mom.

Only so much later, it's January, Donn, and there's snow in
Asheville,
and I never found a way to tell your story.
I'm a little sorry about that,
but what did you think I could write in just a week?

This is like those great rotating gears inside us
that want to sit down
and talk to someone
we could maybe love.
Maybe.
But, Donn, I just keep walking by,
over and over,
in the years since the storm.

I'm so tired, Donn.

Please give me one compelling reason.

Donn, I only needed one.

So I'm sitting down now, but it's dark.
and I'm alone in this room in Asheville,
and it's pretty cold in here. It's so cold,
it's beautiful, and the pastures out there,
they wake up every morning,
and, man, is it good this far away.

Once, we had a nice cup of coffee.
Of all the cups of coffee we've had together, Donn,
that was the nicest one.
Afterwards, we went to the Orpheum.
Do you remember that violinist's name?
Or how the wood bulged in the aisles
like the floor remembered that first wave?

I see a theme here, Donn.
I'm just realizing how many coffees have been about the same
thing these years, Donn.
Most people don't get phone calls from friends
who say, Hey, you wanna grab some coffee,
go see someplace you once loved
that will never be beautiful again—maybe?
Maybe it's actually possible that there is something beautiful
in there. Hey, Katie, *this* is what the afterlife could look like—
I don't think we've ever talked about that day, Donn.

We've argued,
and talked about banana boats and burned books
and the price of life
admiring a coast.

Maybe something about that day, Donn,
is kind of like a marriage,
or at least what it's like
to make a small survival together.

When we're driving, Donn, we're listening to the radio.
It's a song you've chosen, Donn.
But glass is falling from the buildings around us.
And you say, Katie, you'll never forget this song.

Only, Donn, I have never remembered that song.

Didn't I tell you glass was falling
all around us?

We're crossing Esplanade now, Donn.
I say, Donn, this isn't so bad.
And Donn says, Katie, look around you. This is Hell.

I used to think hell was eternity spent
breaking down cardboard boxes.

So I say, Yeah, Donn, I guess you're right.
There's a house full of dead bodies, Donn.
Turn off the music, Donn.
Turn off the music, Donn.

Goddamn it, Donn,
turn off the music.

Yesterday I bent to tell someone about your photos of musicians, Donn,
and even on my knee wonder why I'm kneeling,
when I can say this standing up now.

Who needs dialogue when she has statement?

Now she's learned to say thank you like statement done.

Hey thanks, Percy, thanks, Wolfman, thanks, R.L., thanks, Steve.

You ever put on a hazmat suit?

Well, I like costumes too, but they don't have one of these in my size.

I'm floppy at the wrist and someone's rolling up my sleeves.

There's nothing cute about this, Donn.

I say, God it's hot in here. This is all so hot,
and the sun overhead is like a fire in my skin.

My mother says, Do you need some water?

My mother says that. My mother actually says, Do you need some water?

Do you need some water? Do you need some water?

Nobody in New Orleans
needs any more fucking water.

But I just say,
No thanks, Ma.

Oh my god, it's so hot, it smells so bad, somebody's throwing up.
But it's not me, so come on let's keep going, Donn.

Donn?

Are you still there?

It's so hot.
Do you think it's the suit?
Or could all this salt
be chemically producing
some heat we've never known? God,
I need some shade.

Hey, God, I said I need some shade.
Insert shade, God. Insert shade!

Oh, good.
There's a place in shade
where everything disappears
when I look into the sun.

Thanks, God. That's better now.

Okay, Donn.
I'm ready again.

Hey, Donn, look! There's a plant alive in the rafters!
It's aloe, Donn! I couldn't have made that up. It's aloe!
And Donn says, Do you want that plant?
No. Donn says, You can have that plant.
And I say, No way, Donn.
This place needs that plant.
And I wonder where the camera is for this.
I know you're rolling, camera!

Oh, there's Katie standing ankle-deep in chemicals,
trying find to some metaphors overhead,
Katie, who sometimes thinks she's clever.

I lean over the table
that once held hundreds of images
from different times of Donn's life
in disorganized piles he never minded
that I dug through while he talks about something
I answer over my shoulder
while he's playing the music
I like to hear.
But now the table is in my hands
or on my gloves,

and it's melting!

Even when it's hard to breathe I say, Donn, it's so hot,
and he says, Get outside, Katie, and breathe a little,
but I shake my head
and move toward the darker room—

Donn, I can't find the photos of Enrique.
Is that what you really came here for, Katie?
You can't just look for one thing, someone yells,
you just have to grab what you can find!

But I swear I know the box, I know the box, I know the box.

Somebody says, You can't get in that room,
and I say, I can too get in that room.
But no, I can't get in that room.

Once it was just a long dark hallway.
I spent an hour digging in those boxes
and now they're blocked by furniture
in drenched and convoluted shapes.

Dear Friends,
May you please never know
what a book looks like
dissolving in your hands.

Dear All You People I Haven't Met Yet,
Please, please, please, come home!
Just one of you could be fine too.
I would even go there
if we could agree
to call it home.

I miss that hallway, Donn.
It was always a dark hallway.
I liked it better without the lights on,
when my eyes were two inches
from the boxes—oh, hey, Sue.
Sue's yelling from the next room, Try box number—
(whatever the hell the number might have been).

Sue's boxes.
Sue's studio too.

Oh, it's so good to see you there now, Sue.

You've been gone such a long time now, Sue.

So nobody knows more than I do what it's like
that in the middle of this hell
I find a photo of a banjo.

Hey, Donn! I found Narvin Kimball
and the Jazz Legend Collection—

Oh, sure, Mr. TV Crew over my shoulder,
you who didn't care about the kind little aloe.

Weeks later, on the phone with a friend in Seattle
who's just met a musician
who's just left my hometown,
Jeff says, Katie,
I met this old dog
who's lost his horn
and he says he doesn't know
if he'll ever play again,
because he doesn't know
where song really comes from,
or if it's ever merely been
inside him.

The other night a man I know
was talking, and his body
was like an instrument. It's true,
this could be a different story,

but it's not. He was talking
like that old man's horn
singing a song nobody knows
where it comes from, but it's just like a—

After the storm, Stafford told me *song is*.
No. He said, *Guitar string is*.
He said, he said, he said that everything else could wait,
everything else could wait!

Some people try to call these songs magic,
but there's no magic if you can write it down.
And you can write a song. You can write a song!

Donn, please turn off the music!

Those buildings flashing in the windows,
the old bus stops empty flashing in the windows,
those aren't parks anymore, Donn,
but they're flashing in the windows—
Damn, Donn! Turn off the music, Donn,
turn off the music, Donn. Turn off the music!

But Donn's the kind of man who likes a little music
when he's driving into Hell.

One day, you too might know how some songs hold
small jars of poison.

So I will ride home with my mother, Donn.
I go such a long time

saying nothing then, Yeah, Mom,
I guess I would like to look around now.
Do you mind, Mom?

Then time passes in that way that time passes
when for twenty minutes
you know every minute
like a bomb.

Finally I say, Jesus, Mom.
There's a house with a tricycle on a roof.
(Parents, don't let your kids try that at home!)

Then my mom says what nobody's mom should say.
She says, Katie, I just saw a washing machine
upside-down in the living room.
Mom, the other day
I heard someone say
right there in the middle of an ordinary sentence,
he said, "The wonder of the living world."
Did you hear that, Mom?
He said, The wonder of the living world.
You know how I like to rush and write things down, Mom?
In my rush to write this down I wrote:

Oh, the wonder of the living room!

Can you imagine, Mom, growing old in a house on a hill
with the wonder of the living room?

If I should meet that man again, Mom,

I will ask him please to turn his phrase
and then I'll say, Please, please,
let's go home.

Did you know you really can find miles of houses
where all the front doors are wide open?
That's the closest to nothing
that nothing gets
unless it's gone.

Just me and my mom,
and all that unbelievable silence.

Even the wind sounds sad, Mom.
Close the windows, Mom.
Close the windows, Mom.

Turn off the music, Donn!

That horizon over there,
it's like a scene
from a very bad film.
Even dying can't look this bad, Mom.
It's all white like we're dying in that very bad film, Mom.
Oh, hey, look at that—
we're getting closer, Mom.
And, oh no, this car feels like a hearse—
and this can't be good, Mom.
Don't stop the car. Don't stop the car!

Yes. It is a bad day
when your hearse stops.

Do you know my mom? Of course you know my mom.
She knows people everywhere we go.
But in the middle of this street,
there's a pile of trees.

Oh, I like trees
like I like spiders:
provided they're in the right places.

When we stop, there's another car
through that pile of trees.
And it's a living, breathing car.

Don't get out the car, Mom. Don't get out the car.
Oh no, Mom's getting out the car. Mom's standing outside.
Man, Mom, get back!

You wouldn't get out that car either
unless you're my mom.
And I'm not meeting anybody
in this—

Okay, Mom. I'm getting out the car.
You can introduce me.

Hi there, yeah that's me, and yeah uh huh, I think so, and
no and okay too, and yeah, yeah, maybe see you later.
Nice to meet you.

Some people might be able to write a fable
or another kind of romance about that.

But not me, Donn. I'm back in your studio
with all those people and that damn camera.
I'm armloads of negatives
and piling them in a truck
just for you, Donn,
just because this
is what a *please*
will get you.

Did you know that even in the twenty-first century
in the United States of America,
there was a time when nobody could buy a plastic box?
But I've got some garbage bags.
This really is too bad, Donn.
Nobody wants to put their life's work in a garbage bag.

Are we done?
Where's that damn antibacterial gel?
Has anybody read what it can kill? What can it kill?

Then why's it such a tiny bottle?

Hey, I can take off my hazmat suit now,
I can take off my running shoes now.
I can stand here in my bra and panties
in the middle of a street
I've always known,
because this spot is just as fine
as the finest dressing room
in the finest boutique

in all the land—
or, at least as empty.

I like getting dressed.
Don't you like getting dressed?
Every day?
Could you say every day, Thank You Dear Button Hole,
Dear Zipper, Dear Cotton,
Thank You, Dear Cotton, You Feel Like Home—

I will walk down this block and I will choose my house carefully
because one day I might see this house again.
I will stand in front this house again when I am a very old woman
and I will hold my shoes again in front this house,
one shoe in each hand,
and then one by one I will heave those shoes
over the last standing fence I ever see.

Don't you ever say you can't taste that air.

You can taste that air like you can smell an orange opening
on the other side of a room—
and I'll be right there with you.

Goodbye shoes, goodbye shoes,
meet you on the other side of the bulldozer, shoes!

Oops. Hi there, shoes, still on my feet. Wait a second, shoes,
are you really still there? Of course you're still there
because the door hasn't even opened,
and I'm still standing there, and there's this sound.

It's nothing like a drum I've heard before.
Have you heard a drum like this?
No, I bet even you have never heard a drum like this.
Oh, there's this terrible weight
of my breath in the mask.

Is this what it's like to smother?

Or maybe it's just my breathing. Yes, that's it.
It's my breathing,
and all its damn evidence in my glasses.

My feet are getting wet, Donn,
and, oh no, who knows what this stuff is—
and why am I wearing a hazmat suit
if my shoes aren't even covered?
Who said *this* was a good idea?
Where the hell is my father now?
Maybe I should go and get another flashlight.
Maybe I could put my feet in garbage bags and tie them at the ankle.
Maybe there's still a little sun back there.
It's just so damn hot in here, Donn,
and there's still that drum.

Bang—Bang—Bang.

Where does someone even find a sledgehammer
at a time like this?
I know a woman
who drives with a hammer under her seat

because you just never know
what water might do.

Next time you go boating
just be thankful God made water
and you're *on* it.

Donn, a preposition is the only thing separating us from death!

The door's finally gone now, Donn,
and what I say
when that door's gone
might be the only thing I ever say
that gets recorded
and put in living rooms across America,
where it's merely
dinner time.
You know, fuck you, America, eating your dinner!

But that's not what I say. I say—

You know, one day, Donn will tell me there's still an angel
from State Street.

That noise like the faraway drum
is gone now, Donn,
and the open door
has revealed this room
with an extraordinary sunlight
falling through the roof.

Didn't I tell you prepositions were important?

Who ever thought we would rewrite that phrase like this:

That noise like the faraway drum
is gone now, Donn,
and the open door
has revealed this room
with an extraordinary sunlight
falling *with* the roof, Donn.

Then, there's the incessant hum of the video camera.
And a dangerous silence all around us.

Will I always hear the man beside me breathing?

Until there's this great voice inside of me that says—

That's the voice I want, Donn!
I want to use that voice
in all those dangerous silences!

But this is all I say.
I say, *Oh, my god, Donn. It's gone.*

One time, somebody told you a story
you knew was sad.
Not "supposed to be sad"
like the news,
but actually sad.
And you just sat there

without any reaction.
Do you remember that moment?
Because I'm tired, Donn.
I'm so tired.
I am so tired
of those moments.

Could you take those moments from me?
Can we go home now?
It's such a large pile. Yes, I know the pile
has grown too large.
The pile has grown too large
to see above it.

Oh, I do not wish a burden on you.

But if you took these moments from me,
then I know that you could help me
turn them to a song.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE AUTHOR GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES Jack Bedell, for publishing a previous version of “State Street” in the Fall/Winter 2007 issue of *Louisiana Literature*; Louisiana Secretary of State Jay Dardenne, for including “State Street” in “40 Days and 40 Nights: The Artistic Resiliency of Louisiana” at the Louisiana State Archives; host Tom Bagwell, for featuring “State Street” on “Greater New Orleans” for WLAE-TV, 2008; and producer Donna LaFleur for including “State Street” in “Louisiana: The State We’re In” for Louisiana Public Broadcasting, 2008.

The author expresses sincere thanks to Dave Brinks, Christopher Chambers, Peter Cooley, Nancy Harris, April Robinson, Rob Olmstead, Leslie Shipman, and Edward Porter.

My teachers at Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers helped make this book possible.

I am indebted to Henry Kearney, Maurice Manning, and Alicia Rabins for bringing the music back after it was lost for too long. I wish to thank Lynn Pearlmutter for her strength, my daughters Sophia and Audrey Dingler for their patience and inspiration, and the dear friends and editors who have supported my work: Allison Paige, Marielle Prince, Ross White, and Donn Young.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KATIE BOWLER was born and raised near New Orleans, Louisiana, where her family settled in the early 1700s. Katie remained in Louisiana for more than two years following Hurricane Katrina, and has since relocated to Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Katie has published fiction, non-fiction, and poetry in numerous magazines, anthologies, newspapers, and journals including *The Times-Picayune* and *Louisiana Literature*. She was a writer, featured poet and coordinator for “40 Days and 40 Nights,” an exhibit at the Louisiana State Archives featuring more than 100 artists telling the story of the rebuilding of Louisiana. She earned her MFA in creative writing at Warren Wilson College, where she was awarded the Friends of Writers Grant and the Lisel Mueller Grant. Katie is the assistant dean for communications at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Law.



A BULL CITY PRESS PUBLICATION



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KATIE BOWLER was born and raised near New Orleans, La. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, she returned to the city to salvage photographs, art, and pieces of New Orleans' cultural history. In *State Street*, she explores loss of home and homeland, experiences the panic and awe of the familiar becoming unfamiliar, and finds among the wreckage humanity, humor, and hope.

\$10.00 US / \$14.00 CAN

ISBN 978-1-4243-1798-1

90000>



9 781424 317981